



Everglades Headwaters Refuge and Conservation Area Proposal



Carlton Ward, Jr. /CarltonWard.com

“This initiative is aimed at preserving a rural working ranch landscape to protect and restore one of the great grassland and savanna landscapes of eastern North America.”

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, January 2011

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with multiple partners, is studying the potential for a refuge and conservation area in south-central Florida. The preliminary proposal calls for the protection of 150,000 acres in an area northwest of Lake Okeechobee.

The primary goals for the proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area would be to:

- Conserve and restore habitat for 88 threatened and endangered species, including Florida panthers, Florida black bears, Florida scrub-jays, whooping cranes, wood storks, Everglades snail kites and Eastern indigo snakes.

- Safeguard water supplies for millions of south Floridians by protecting the headwaters and groundwater recharge areas for the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, Kissimmee River and Lake Okeechobee.
- Preserve one of Florida’s last working rural landscapes. Working with local communities, ranchers, farmers, and other partners, the Service would protect natural resources and the local economy while providing outdoor recreation and educational opportunities.

Schedule for the Proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area Project

Gather Public Comments
January-February 2011

Develop Draft Land Protection Plan and Environmental Documents
March-May 2011

Conduct Public Review and Comment on Proposal
June 2011

Develop Final Plan for Approval
August-September 2011



Lake Wales Ridge National Wildlife Refuge, which is within the Study Area, © Reed Bowman, Research Biologist, Archbold Biological Station

For More Information and to Submit Questions and Comments

Internet

<http://www.fws.gov/southeast/greatereverglades/>

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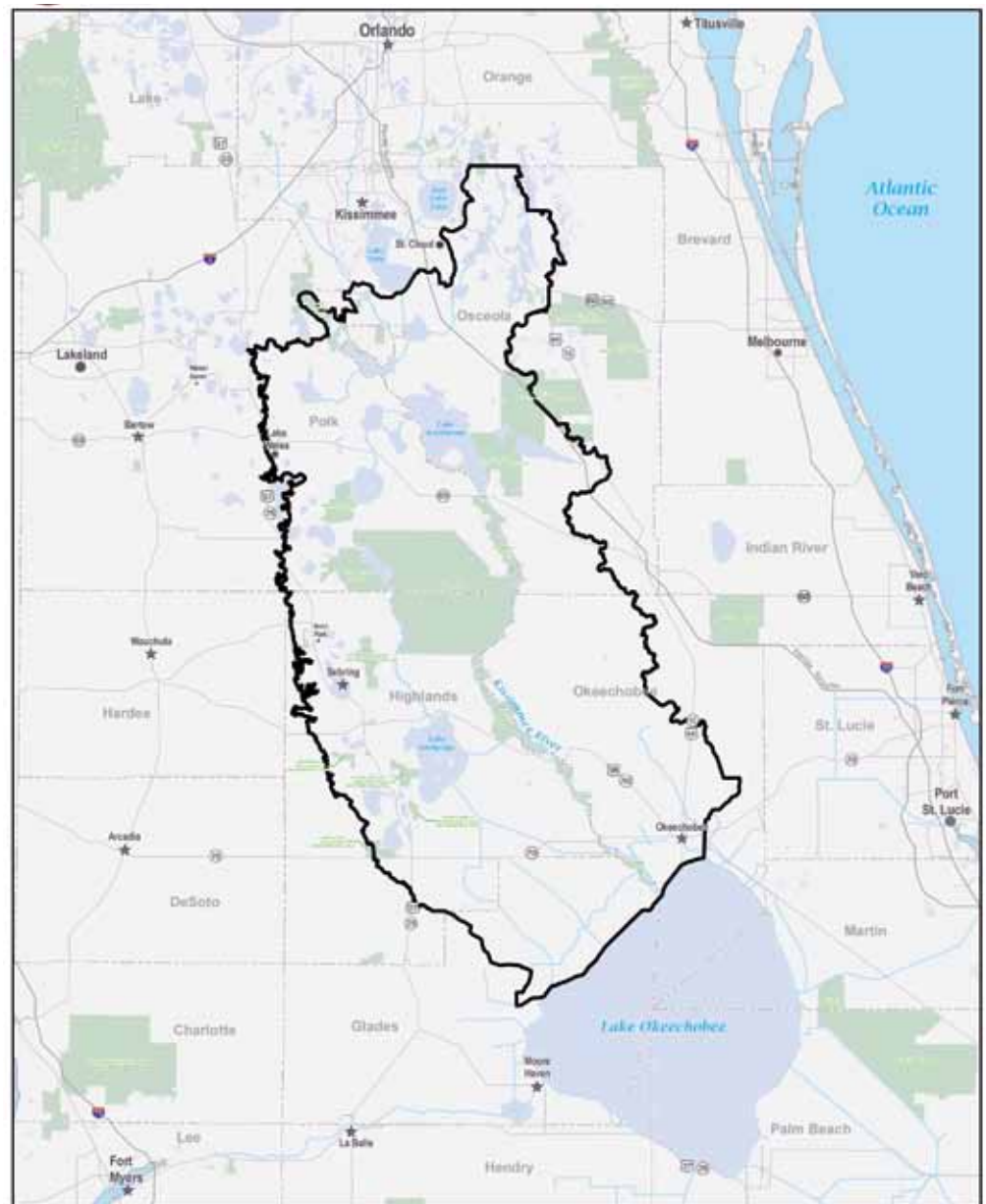
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Eastern indigo snake, by Jim Godwin

Study Area for the Proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area



The Service and its partners are conducting a preliminary study of the Kissimmee River Valley to identify about 150,000 acres of high-value environmental landscapes for a potential refuge and conservation area.

Current Partners within the Greater Everglades Landscape

- Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- Florida Division of State Lands
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- National Wildlife Refuge Association
- The Nature Conservancy
- Private landowners and ranchers
- South Florida Water Management District
- U.S. Air Force, Avon Park Air Force Range
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area?

The Service is proposing to establish a national wildlife refuge and conservation area on 150,000 acres in Polk, Osceola, Okeechobee, and Highlands counties in south-central Florida. The purpose is to conserve one of the nation's prime areas of biological diversity, protect the headwaters of the iconic Everglades ecosystem, help to safeguard water supplies for millions of South Floridians, and preserve a working rural landscape of ranches and farms.

What is a Study Area?

A Study Area is an area the Service plans to evaluate to identify a proposed acquisition boundary. There are no legal or regulatory implications for land included or excluded from a Study Area. In this case, the Study Area includes 1.78 million acres, within which the Service hopes to identify a 150,000-acre acquisition boundary for the refuge and conservation area.



© Eric Blackmore

Landowners, who choose not to sell, continue to manage their lands as before.

How would a refuge and conservation area be created?

The Service and its partners would work with willing landowners to establish the proposed refuge and conservation area through several methods, including fee simple purchases, conservation easements, leases, lands set aside through habitat conservation plans, and/or cooperative agreements with landowners. The planning target is to work with partners and willing landowners to purchase 50,000 acres for the refuge, and create a conservation area by acquiring easements on an additional 100,000 acres that would remain privately owned.

Who is leading this effort?

The Service is leading this effort and is coordinating with multiple partners. For many years, numerous agencies, organizations, and landowners have sought to conserve this unique landscape. Our partners include ranchers, the Florida Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services, South Florida Water Management District, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida Division of State Lands, Osceola County Parks Division, The Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Refuge Association, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the

U.S. Air Force's Avon Park Air Force Range.

If I want to sell my land or otherwise make it part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, what options do I have?

The Service acquires interest in lands in a variety of ways, including fee title purchase, donation, lease, and conservation easement.

What if my land is within the approved acquisition boundary and I do not want to sell?

You maintain every right to your land, including the right to sell your land to whomever you choose. It is the policy of the Service to purchase lands only from willing sellers. An approved acquisition boundary does not require you to sell your property to the Service. You would be unaffected by the establishment of the new boundary, except that a national wildlife refuge might now be one of your neighbors.

If the refuge and conservation area are created, would I be able to use it for activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking and bird watching?

The Service gives priority consideration to six wildlife-dependent public uses on national wildlife refuges: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

(continued)



Will Burnett hunting on St. Marks NWR near Tallahassee, Florida, by USFWS.

What is an acquisition boundary?

An acquisition boundary is the area within which the Service is authorized to negotiate with landowners willing to sell interest in their properties. Acquisition boundaries for refuges and conservation areas are typically approved by the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The U.S. Congress may also approve them.

The boundary itself does not give the Service any special jurisdiction or control over these lands. Lands become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System when they are purchased from willing sellers or placed under agreements with willing participants.

If these uses are determined to be compatible with refuge purposes, and funds are available to manage them, they would be allowed within the proposed 50,000 acres that would be purchased to create the refuge. During the planning process, lands proposed for acquisition would be evaluated for the priority recreational uses. Some areas could be open to all six uses, while few or no uses might be allowed on other areas of the refuge.

Each year, nearly 40 million people visit national wildlife refuges. More than 300 refuges, the vast majority, allow hunting. More than half allow fishing.

Would I be allowed to operate an airboat on the proposed refuge?

Airboat operation would be allowed on the State's sovereign waters. Airboat access on non-State waters would be held to the same compatibility requirements as every other non-priority public use.

Would I be allowed the same recreational opportunities on the privately owned lands in the conservation area?

Landowners who choose to sell their development rights would retain many other ownership rights. They would not be required to allow public use activities on their property.

How would the Service manage the refuge?

The proposed refuge most likely would include fire-adapted habitats such as pinelands, oak-palmetto scrub, and dry prairie, which depend upon periodic fire to remain healthy. Prescribed fire would be used to reduce the threat of wildfires to adjacent communities and maintain habitat for native wildlife.

The Service also would likely control invasive and non-native plants to restore a healthy, biologically diverse landscape. Some of the methods the Service uses include herbicide, fire, and mechanical techniques. Non-native animals, such as hogs, would be managed through hunts or other appropriate methods.

How would the conservation easements be managed?

Local landowners who choose to participate in the conservation easement program would work with refuge staff to develop mutually-agreed upon wildlife and habitat management plans. The landowner would be responsible for managing the land according to the plan with input and technical assistance from refuge staff. Because these lands are

privately-owned, public access would depend upon the landowner.

How would I know what the Service is planning to do with the lands it purchases?

The draft Land Protection Plan for the proposed refuge and conservation area is scheduled to be completed and released to the public for comments by June 2011. The documents will describe the Service's vision of how the new refuge and conservation area might be managed, as well as which uses would be allowed initially. To keep informed of this planning process, you can sign up for the proposal's mailing list, check the project's website (<http://www.fws.gov/southeast/greataeverglades/>), and/or contact us directly (EvergladesHeadwatersProposal@fws.gov or 321/861 2368).

If the acquisition boundary is approved, the Service would then begin developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan to guide the refuge and conservation area, including allowed public uses, for the next 10 to 15 years. The public would once again be invited to express their opinions and provide feedback.

Would land use and zoning change within the refuge acquisition boundary?

Zoning and land use regulations would continue under the jurisdiction of the appropriate local government. The Service would manage only its own

property, or property in which it acquires an interest.

How would tax revenues be affected if lands become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System?

While it's true that lands acquired by the Service are removed from the tax rolls, the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (Public Law 95-469), allows us to offset the tax losses by annually paying the county or other local government an amount that often equals or exceeds that which would have been collected from taxes if the land was in private ownership. This law requires that the revenue sharing payments to the counties for our purchased land will be based on the greatest of:

- $\frac{3}{4}$ of 1 percent of the market value;
- 25 percent of the net receipts; or
- 75 cents per acre.

Funding for the payments comes from income generated on national wildlife refuges. If there is not enough revenue, Congress is authorized to appropriate money to make up the difference. Service lands are reappraised every five years to ensure that payments to local governments remain equitable. On lands where the Service acquires only partial interest through easement, all taxes would remain the responsibility of the individual landowner.



Black bears, credit USFWS/Larry Richardson